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ABSTRACT

This author argues that teachers of the humanities have the potential to enjoy, at the community college level, specific teaching opportunities that their university counterparts are less likely to exercise. University professors of upper-division and graduate students are more likely to find themselves teaching students about the particulars of job searching, rather than preparing them to be human beings in a social context. The place of the humanities in this quest has shifted, according to the article, to the community college. In the pursuit of this end, critical thinking should be the foremost goal of community college teachers. The author aims to define critical thinking, and cites some of his own teaching experiences as examples of how to help students to develop their critical thinking skills. The author cites his use of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" in the classroom. The author's hope is that students will have a free-for-all discussion among themselves as opposed to a moderated discussion or a simple interrogation by the teacher. The author tries to avoid stepping in to moderate once discussion has begun, preferring instead to allow students to address one another. In addition, the aim should be to get the students to find something true in response to the questions posed rather than simply voice an opinion. (Author/NB)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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CCHA Eastern Division Conference
New York, NY
Dr. Wm Moeck

"R(e)Defining the Liberal Arts: Critical Thinking at the Community College Level"

Teachers of the humanities have the potential to enjoy at the community-college level an opportunity with their students that their university counterparts are less likely to exercise. University professors of upper-division courses–not to mention graduate school courses–are more likely to find themselves training anxious young men and women within the confines of a given discipline. They train students how to research, how to publish, how to network at conferences, how, in other words, to start the ball rolling in order to look for a job. And the place of the humanities as a way preparing young men and women to be human beings rather than job candidates has paradoxically shifted during our lifetime to community colleges, where ironically only a tiny fraction of the students have the skills–not to mention the burning ambition–necessary for seeking a specialized degree in a traditional academic discipline.

The ability to think critically ought stand foremost, I believe, as the goal that community-college teachers set for their students, but what is critical thinking? And what would happen now if, after asking what it is, I said nothing else for the thirteen minutes and ten seconds remaining to me? There would probably be silence at first followed by some irritated shuffling. Some of you might try to talk between yourselves, though depending on my mood, I might turn the spotlight on you and demand to know what you were saying. Is what you are saying relevant to my question, and if not, why not? Part of your collective response would of course depend on whether you had known in advance that you could–that you were in fact expected to–say

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something, say anything, and whenever, within the limits of common courtesy, you wanted. Such is the exactly the kind of shock treatment to which I submit students when I am able to do what I think most needs doing with students. Is it teaching exactly? I leave that question to my detractors. Does it foster critical thinking on their behalf? The purpose of this talk it to describe how it does.

This week it is Thoreau's essay on "Civil Disobedience" that my composition class is reading. I am not an Americanist by trade; nor is my field of expertise the nineteenth-century, so I enter class unburdened by a lot of excess mental baggage in need of unpacking. It is just me, a xerox of Thoreau, and twenty-four students, of whom maybe only half will have had the time to skim through the text in advance. We sit in a circle and read the essay aloud, the students taking turns paragraph by paragraph, some of them seriously mispronouncing words, which no matter how mangled, go uncorrected. At least by me. At this point in the semester, neighbors of the student reading will sometimes whisper not too quietly a better rendition of a particularly egregious garbling, and this kind of peer correction usually increases by the end of the semester, as the students get used to taking more responsibility for their own education. At the beginning of the semester, I emphasize that it is sometimes more important just to get through a performance–which reading aloud is–than to demand perfection. And this week, after we are a few pages into Thoreau, I interrupt by asking the class to consider why he thinks that "we should be men first and subjects afterward."[1]

Eventually they will have to write something on the subject, but the emphasis in class will be on the actual discussion. I believe no student can write well on a subject unless it be fluently articulated aloud first. And this question on which they will be writing is one that I believe is

genuine: I am unsure myself how best to answer it. I think a cogent argument could be made for reversing Thoreau's order: why couldn't someone claim that our humanity is made possible only after we are able to recognize some kind of authority. Why Thoreau says that we should be men before we are subjects is also interesting to me because of the confusion embedded in the key terms of "men" and "subjects." Are women to be included in this equation? And what is a subject? Freshman composition is the subject my students are taking in the English department where I officially teach, although unofficially I think it fairer to say that this week they are studying Thoreau. Here, the man really does take precedence over the subject.

What I am hoping will happen, and what sometimes does, is a free-for-all discussion between my students, in which one speaks to another while the rest listen, as a opposed to either a moderated discussion or the more simple interrogation. Moderated discussions tend to bring out the control freak in me, so that I am scrupulously cleaning up after every errant remark let slip; and interrogations are even worse, turning me into an intellectual sniper taking aim on timid and panicked students. Yet the methods by which a free-for-all discussion can be satisfactorily achieved are not written in stone. And common courtesy can prove as difficult to define as critical thinking itself is, especially in the face of conflicting points of view that are fueled by personality differences. The moment at which my classes appear to dissolve into anarchy I find it harder to resist the temptation to seize authority than simply to wait and let the class establish for itself what would be a reasonable response.

But the anarchy I worry over later in the semester is the reverse of the problem I have to deal with at the beginning, when students have not yet realized the extent to which I want them to determine the course by which my question will be answered. Earlier in the semester, what I

need be prepared to wade out is deafening silence. After we have all read aloud from a text and I ask a question, there is after an initial pause usually a flurry of responses–two, possibly even three brave students will venture an answer to the question, each answer not clearly related to the others. But rather than stepping in immediately to synthesize the responses, or to point out potential disagreements, I prefer to prolong this new silence as long as possible. It's safe to ask one of the brave students what he or she means until it becomes evident that it is always the same one or two students volunteering the initial responses. Here one crosses a dangerous threshold by engaging yet again in one-on-one discussion with a particular individual, for no matter how enlightened his or her response, the rest of the class will feel alienated and withdraw.

I am a pretty good actor and I find more effective the first few weeks the practice of stonily staring into the text, as if all the mysteries on nature were contained therein. This painful kind of silence can usually be endured by a class for upwards of two or three minutes before it begins to fidget as if it were the butt of some candid-camera kind of joke. And before the whispering sets in, I can find it to be a decorous, if not down-right beautiful, silence that reigns in the expectation of what will happen next. But what will happen next? Those two or three bold speakers are made to wait in intense concentration for signs of approval or disapproval on my behalf, or for at least a follow-up question. Yet not only do I avoid giving students what I want them to learn to give one another, I continue avoiding eye-contact, which can be construed as favoritism, with any student just yet. That larger part of the class which has remained in silence from the start is waiting in variety of poses. There are those not in the habit of speaking publicly anyway and who concentrate on the proceedings as if witnessing the unfolding of a drama. They are the ones seeking some clue to know whether to laugh or cry. They want to be able to predict

the outcome accurately for only then will needlessness of participation have been justified. Then there are others–those who might have ventured an answer if only different circumstances had prevailed–these are the ones I hoping will provide the explicit approval or disapproval of what has so far transpired. They don't usually rescue me, at least not in the beginning of the semester. And when the suspense becomes unbearable, I get up and transcribe what has been said on the board as well as my memory will permit, and then wait again. I will write on the board, mind you, without editing or making corrections, only after more a couple of students have spoken. This gives me time to stall. And if no one new joins in the conversation I usually look for a way of making my opening question broader rather than narrower, opening up beyond Thoreau, for example, in the hopes of drawing in wider range of participants. If asking why he thinks we should become men before subjects doesn't make the class take off, I might play a little dumb by asking if Thoreau was referring to the age at which people become men.

One danger I constantly face is that students, the smarter of them in particular, can jump to the wrong conclusion that what we are doing is voicing opinions. On the contrary–and this is what I have to assert more than once–I want to enable each of them to say something true in response to the question I have asked, and not just to me but to one another. Just as you as professionals are able to recognize the difference between a workshop and a bull-session, so I want my students to realize that there are worse answers and better answers to the same question, and that the best answer is the best because it is the most reasonable. Still, I have to shake them of the impression that I am hosting a shouting match or an academic version of social one-upmanship. It's an acquired trait nowadays for students to believe that they can learn from one another, probably because the most social interaction that some of them get is looking at the back

of the car in front of them on the highway. This de-centering of authority so that reason itself can hold sway could more easily be established if each class were lead by a team of professors working off each other.

As it is, the drama, if not group therapy, that I am trying to stage singlehandedly is always in the service of critical thinking, which I believe to be a threshold or liminal experience: it exists on the cusp of reading and writing. And if what you are hearing thus far makes good sense to you–better yet, were you to say to yourself, "hey, that Bill Moeck demonstrates in his writing the selfsame critical thinking that I wish our students could muster up"–it is only because in the writing of this essay I took the position of being my own interlocutor. As if internalizing a dialogue I imagined having with others, I asked myself questions as I went along, anticipated objections, and tried to take you through a process of logically unfolding thoughts. But I was able to imagine such a dialogue only because I have already actually participated in many.

Critical thinking is also related to our capacity for prolonged concentration. And just as the prolonged concentration of a limited number of people within a closely confined space ought have somewhat odious associations, so there is something potentially cruel about the way must think for themselves or perish in my classes. At the end of Elie Wiesel's Night, the narrator discovers that his sick father was removed to the crematory at Buchenwald. He remembers his father's last words to have been a call for water: "A summons," Wiesel writes, "to which I did not respond. I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I had no more tears. And, in the depths of my being, in the recesses of my weakened conscience, could I have searched it, I might perhaps have found something like–free at last!"[2] Why does Wiesel refuse his father, and how does that refusal lead to his retrospective sense of freedom? If we could

answer that question, I think we might have a better sense of what freedom is generally and of the way that the study of the liberal arts, to which critical thinking is key, can be said to set us a free. The problem is that words get in the way.

The very expression "critical thinking" in academia functions as a kind of shibboleth or "open sesame." I remember using the expression during my job interview at Nassau Community College when asked to describe my pedagogy. And the doors of Nassau once being opened to me, I noticed it again as if a magic password in the results of self-study questionnaire circulating among various departments. That skill deemed by Nassau's professors most lacking in the student body was "critical thinking." And whatever it is, "critical thinking," I am forced to conclude, must be very good and very powerful, like virtue. It might be sufficient to add that each and every professor has his or her own definition of the term and how it is best taught to students. Yet it seems equally possible to me that there are even more fine professors who never give the expression any thought: they can get their students to think critically without having recourse to special terminology to bruit abroad what they do. In other words, it may be the case that critical thinking is not taught in the way that it is possible to teach someone to program a VCR. Critical thinking may be more than a little like virtue: what if it is a condition of the soul, available to even to nineteen-year olds, but which does not depend on our teachers teaching it so much as it is affected by, perhaps obliquely, a teacher's mediation.

In conclusion, I should be hard-pressed to define critical thinking–is it the same as analysis? or the ability to make connections? or is it the rejection of all authority in favor of discovering one's own voice? Perhaps it is not so much as the ability to solve problems as the recognition itself that there are problems. In that case, critical thinking would not be a

transmittable skill or technique but a natural activity of the mind that a teacher could only foster by setting in place the conditions necessary for it to happen. In other words, I would like to renounce for the purpose of today's talk all claims to being an English teacher, and even claims to being a teacher of Thoreau. Rather I am just another reader of Thoreau, like my students for whom Thoreau is the real teacher and I, only the mediator, maybe the most accomplished student in the class, but still somebody who continues to learn from reading Thoreau. I don't know exactly what critical thinking is, but I can point with certainty to where and when it is. Critical thinking exists in this room–not in the pronouncements I am making now but in the conversation that will follow my presentation. Call it dialogue if you will, or dialectic, or just plain talk–the movement in thought that we will share together in response to the question "What is critical thinking?" will be its own answer.

Endnotes

1. Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," ed. Lee A. Jacobus, A World of Ideas (NY: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002) p. 146.

2. Elie Wiesel, Night, trans. Stella Rodway (NY: Bantam, 1982) p. 106.

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